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Spectres of Fiction: New Political Contexts for *The Playboy of the Western World*

Eva Urban

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This paper was presented at the SOFEIR conference, “Irlande: spectres et chimères / Ireland: Spectres and Chimeras”, Reims, february 2020.

It's the truth they're saying, and if I'd that lad in
the house, I wouldn't be fearing the loosed khaki
cut throats, or the walking dead¹.

- ¹ The recent Lyric Theatre and Dublin Theatre Festival co-production (in association with Belfast International Arts Festival) of J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), directed by Oonagh Murphy, was staged at Dublin's Gaiety Theatre and at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast in the autumn of 2019. It encouraged an abstract reading of the play in new political contexts as an artful parody of shifting notions of power, social position, leadership, and heroism. Executive producer Jimmy Fay opens his programme note with a direct reference to the play's links with “these strange times of opportunistic politics” that encourage hero worship in the contemporary world of “a sort of hero with a story”. He closes his note with the statement that “the story is the thing. It can make you a hero or bring retribution on your head”². In its departure from naturalism, which also included the Brechtian *gestus*, the performance staged the play's social critique in the style of a folk tale or parable. The production was set in the 1970s / 1980s at the Derry / Donegal border and performed in Northern Irish accents. As explicitly highlighted in the director's programme note, it was haunted by references to the border area's history of deprivation, powerlessness, the violence and

the victims of the Northern Ireland conflict, the communal trauma, and the current threat posed by Brexit:

And so you'll hear that we've situated our *shebeen*, a little further north than Mayo, it's a failing pub in a small town at the edge of somewhere, on the border of one place and another. We've talked about places like Ballyshannon. And other towns in Donegal, previously prosperous towns, cut off after partition, and facing huge fears about further marginalisation through a Brexit-imposed hard border.

In transposing it to here, it brings into sharp focus how the play is an extension of the loneliness and disenfranchisement that comes from living in a place that lies far away from where the power lies³.

- 2 Molly O'Cathain's elaborate naturalistic set design displayed the interior of the pub from crisp packets to a sacred heart picture and of Pegeen Mike's neat bedroom with net curtains upstairs in careful detail. In her programme note Molly O'Cathain describes the bedroom she designed as "an homage to all the bad B'n'B décor of Ireland". In that way she consciously created an artistic spectre of many an audience member's fondly remembered holidays in the West of Ireland. Pegeen's bedroom is a particularly original feature of this production. O'Cathain points out: "as far as I know she has never had one before (in any other production)"⁴. However, in her focus on highlighting "the real poverty and hardship that shapes these characters' lives" in the play, O'Cathain took her artistic inspiration for the set from international sources such as "the work of photographers such as Lise Sarfati, Martin Parr and Richard Billingham" as well as "hundreds of references of bars and pubs":

Lise Sarfati's striking series documenting 1990s Russia became our strongest palette and tonal reference. For more practical details, I also gathered hundreds of references of bars and pubs; mainly from present-day Irish property listings and photographs of the flat roof pubs of post-war Britain⁵.

- 3 This artistically conceived naturalistic set was strikingly contrasted with a stylised performance. The emphasis on the poetic language and the exaggerated physical postures as well as frequent asides to the audience gave a Shakespearean quality to the play. In his opening note, Jimmy Fay draws an explicit connection between spectres in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Synge's *Christy Mahon*, maintaining that "both protagonists must confront the ghosts of their fathers to find their true worth"⁶. According to Christopher Murray, Synge's play is "the *Hamlet* of the Irish tradition"⁷. David Butler has analysed in detail the extent to which the text is explicitly haunted by the graveyard scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*⁸. He explains that "The skulls of the politician, the lawyer, the courtier and the jester, 'the great people there was one time walking the world'" in the graveyard scene in *Hamlet*, "have their comic counterpart in the 'White skulls and black skulls and yellow skulls, and some with full teeth, and some haven't only but one' listed out by Jimmy"⁹ in Act 3 in *The Playboy of the Western World*. Philly's and Jimmy's philosophical dialogue about skulls and the storing of the latter in Dublin mocks the idea of the evanescence of life, the inevitability of death, and the temporality and mutability of all human power and greatness that *Hamlet* reflects on:

PHILLY. Supposing a man's digging spuds in that field with a long spade, and supposing he flings up the two halves of that skull, what'll be said then in the papers and the courts of law?

JIMMY. They'd say it was an old Dane, maybe, was drowned in the flood. [*Old Mahon comes in and sits down near door listening*] Did you never hear tell of the skulls they have in the city of Dublin, ranged out like blue jugs in a cabin of Connaught?

PHILLY. And you believe that?

JIMMY. [*Pugnaciously*] Didn't a lad see them and he after coming from harvesting in

the Liverpool boat? “They have them there,” says he, “making a show of the great people there was one time walking the world. White skulls and black skulls and yellow skulls, and some full teeth, and some haven’t only but one.”

PHILLY. It was no lie, maybe, for when I was a young lad there was a graveyard beyond the house with the remnants of a man who had thighs as long as your arm. He was a horrid man, I’m telling you, and there was many a fine Sunday I’d put him together for fun, and he with shiny bones, you wouldn’t meet the like of these days in the cities of the world.

MAHON. [*Getting up*] You wouldn’t, is it? Lay your eyes on that skull and tell me where and when there was another the like of it, is splintered only from the blow of a loy. (Act 3, p. 104-105)

- 4 Philly’s and Jimmy’s disrespectful description of the anonymity and vulnerability of skulls and bones is in stark contrast to the emphasis Hamlet places on the personal identity of the skulls he finds in the graveyard scene. Jacques Derrida has analysed this scene in the context of the concept of mourning:

First of all, mourning. We will be speaking of nothing else. It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by localizing the dead (all ontologization, all semanticisation – philosophical, hermeneutical, or psychoanalytical –, finds itself caught up in this work of mourning but, as such it does not yet think it; we are posing here the question of the spectre, to the spectre, whether it be Hamlet’s or Marx’s, on this near side of such thinking). One has to know. *One has to know it. One has to have knowledge* [il faut le savoir]. Now, to know is to know *who* and *where*, to know whose body it really is and what place it occupies, for it must stay in its place. In a safe place. Hamlet does not ask merely to whom the skull belonged [...] he wants to know to whom the grave belongs (“Whose grave’s this, Sir?”). Nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one *has to know* who is buried where and it is *necessary* (to know, to make certain), that, in what remains of him, *he remains there*. Let him stay there and move no more¹⁰!

- 5 The cynical discussion of skulls and “the remnants of a man” in *The Playboy of the Western World* undermines all these requirements of mourning. In the 1970s / 1980s Irish border context of the 2019 production, it has a sinister significance. Over this production looms the spectre of the many victims of the Troubles: not only those buried in graveyards, but also the Disappeared¹¹ whose remains cannot be located to this day or whose remains were found buried anonymously, for example in the bogs of the border county Monaghan.
- 6 Christy’s father Mahon, gravely injured by his son’s attack but apparently still alive, proudly compares himself to the skulls as a kind of undead “remnant of a man” with a particularly sturdy skull, “walking hundreds and long scores of miles” and “telling stories of that naked truth” (Act 3, p. 105). The very concept of “telling stories of that naked truth” is an oxymoron as storytelling implies an element of fiction which contradicts the idea of pure truth. It implies a folkloric mythologisation of events. This is confirmed by the significant variations in Mahon’s account:

WIDOW QUIN. Do you know what? That man’s raving from his wound today, for I met him a while since telling a rambling tale of a tinker had him destroyed. Then he heard of Christy’s deed, and he up and says it was his son had cracked his skull [...]. (Act 3, p. 105)

- 7 Anthony Roche highlights that Christy gives a “mythical account” of his father as “a figure from Celtic mythology” and that he then proceeds to claim this mythical prowess for himself¹². I would argue that Christy also inherits his tendency to

mythologise from his father who tells his own tales as pointed out above by the Widow Quin.

- 8 This essay explores how Murphy's production as performed at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast in October / November 2019 highlighted spectres of fiction in the play. I will demonstrate that the play and production are haunted not just by historical dramaturgical traditions and by the ghosts of the Northern Irish conflict but also by the ghosts of ancient wandering Irish bards. However, my analysis goes beyond traditional readings of the text which are often confined to an Irish context. As Cathy Leeney argues, recent intercultural and international productions have challenged the focus on the local as they "illustrate the play's openness as a site for intercultural representation, tested through translation in the broadest sense, against intercultural social realities, within Ireland and internationally"¹³. I offer a contemporary approach that situates the play's preoccupation with fiction within an international context of the "social realities" of populist propaganda. Richard Wakely, artistic director and chief executive of the Belfast International Arts Festival, evokes such contemporary connections in his programme note:

[...] the play continues to resonate with our contemporary world in sometimes unexpected ways. When Synge wrote the play, *Playboy* did not have the meaning it has today. Rather, it meant *hoaxer* or *trickster*. The Widow Quin calls Christy Mahon "the playboy of the western world" after discovering that his father is still alive. In doing so, she is in effect calling him a fraud or indeed a liar in her belief that he concocted the entire story. Audiences may recognise a similar approach to deceive through spinning tales by accomplished tricksters in our world today¹⁴.

- 9 The protagonist Christy Mahon is persecuted by the "ghost" of his "undead" father. Furthermore, Christy's own artistry and invented fiction haunts him much in the same way that contemporary populist media and politicians are arguably more respected for creating fiction than for speaking the truth. While the public admire a "fine, gamey, treacherous lad" (Widow Quin, Act 2, p. 90), it is Christy's vulnerability, once exposed, they disdain and which turns him from a bully into a bullied victim. In the words of Christopher Murray, "what Synge's playboy finally emerges as is 'an enemy of the people'"¹⁵. In the play, as in the contemporary political world, spectres of artful fiction have an eerily powerful hold over people's perceptions of reality.
- 10 The fact that aspects of the production's costumes and hairstyles also related to the current 1980s fashion revival (in 2019) served to highlight the contemporary relevance. Furthermore, in the contemporary international political climate of right-wing populism, the poetically lying vagabond Christy Mahon can be read as a universal representation of political demagoguery and the worship of charlatans. In Murphy's production, the hysterical worship of Christy Mahon by a group of young girls and the admiration bestowed on him for perceived violent actions quickly turn into public contempt and violence against himself once he is exposed as a liar. It appears that bravado talk of cruelty and brutality is oddly attractive to the mob when delivered by a "leader" with "the gift of the gab", and rewarded by them without regard for the truth; however, they will also turn against and depose their "strong man" once he betrays any element of weakness. This astonishing doubleness is clearly conveyed in both the Widow Quin's and Christy's own father's disbelief at the very idea that the public would cheer on "a true idiot born", "that dribbling idiot", a disbelief shared by many in the contemporary world:

WIDOW QUIN. You seen that you're mad. [*cheering outside*] Do you hear them cheering him in the zig-zags of the road? Aren't you after saying that your son's a fool, and how would they be cheering a true idiot born?

MAHON. [*Getting distressed*] It's maybe out of reason that that man's himself. [*cheering again*] There's none surely will go cheering him. Oh, I'm raving with a madness that would fright the world! [*he sits down with a hand to his head*] There was one time I seen ten scarlet devils letting on they'd cork my spirit in a gallon can; and one time I seen rats as big as badgers sucking the life blood from the butt of my lug; but I never till this day confused that dribbling idiot with a likely man. I'm destroyed surely. (Act 3, p. 108)

- 11 In Murphy's production, it becomes clear that the lies are never actually believed by the crowd, but it is the poetic quality of the storytelling and the bravado of Christy that seduce them. In spite of their pretend outrage at his lies once discovered, we get the sense that the lies themselves were acceptable to them as long as Christy successfully projected the image of a violent "strongman" that inspired their fear and admiration. It is the threat of his violent temper that provokes their respect as they expect this to intimidate the "peelers" (Police) and British soldiers, who are continuously referred to as an enemy throughout the play:

MICHAEL. And the peelers never followed after you the eleven days that you're out?

CHRISTY. [*Shaking his head*] Never a one of them, and I walking forward facing hog, dog, or devil on the highway of the road.

PHILLY. [*Nodding wisely*] It's only with a common weekday kind of a murderer them lads would be trusting their carcase, and that man should be a great terror when his temper's roused. (Act 1, p. 77)

PHILLY. The peelers is fearing him, and if you'd that lad in the house there isn't one of them would come smelling around if the dogs itself were lapping poteen from the dungpit of the yard.

JIMMY. Bravery's a treasure in a lonesome place, and a lad would kill his father, I'm thinking, would face a foxy devil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell.

PEGEEN. It's the truth they're saying, and if I'd that lad in the house, I wouldn't be fearing the loosed khaki cut-throats, or the walking dead. (Act 1, p. 78)

- 12 Ironically, when the widow Quin knocks on the door, Christy himself declares his own "terror" of the "peelers" and "the walking dead". This comically ridicules Pegeen's earlier trust in his ability to protect her from them as he now physically clings to her:

CHRISTY. [*Clinging to Pegeen*] Oh, glory! It's late for knocking, and this last while I'm in terror of the peelers, and the walking dead. (Act 1, p. 83)

- 13 He displays similar terror when he spots a "spectre" of his father walking towards the pub:

CHRISTY. It's the walking spirit of my murdered dad!

[...]

CHRISTY. Where'll I hide my poor body from that ghost of hell? (Act 2, p. 98)

- 14 When it emerges that Christy's "undead" father is still alive, Pegeen is embarrassed and angry to have associated herself with his lies. It is all about status and bravado backed up by the admiring mob: as is the case with school gangs and bullies, Pegeen was excited to be part of the mob that worshipped the "Playboy of the Western World", but once the mob has dropped Christy, she no longer wishes to be associated with him:

CROWD. You're fooling, Pegeen! The Widow Quin seen this day, and you likely knew! You're a liar!

CHRISTY. [*Dumfounded*] It's himself was a liar, lying stretched out with an open head on him, letting on he was dead.

[...]

PEGEEN. And to think of the coaxing glory we had given him, and he after doing nothing but hitting a soft blow and chasing northward in a sweat of fear. Quit off from this.

CHRISTY. [*Piteously*] You've seen my doings this day, and let you save me from the old man; for why would you be in such a scorch of haste to spur me to destruction now?

PEGEEN. It's there your treachery is spurring me, till I'm hard set to think you're the one I'm after lacing in my heart-strings half an hour gone by. [*to Mahon*] Take him on from this, for I think bad the world should see me raging for a Munster liar, and the fool of men. (Act 3, p. 115-116)

- 15 Peter Crawley, in his *Irish Times* review, draws attention to the ways in which Oonagh Murphy's production "makes a particular phrase pop out: 'making game' in which deception, abuse and humiliation are all sports to pass the time":

Even when Playboy turns gravely serious – in this staging in full view of the audience – it seems like a game that has spun out of control where murder can be applauded if it is told well enough, but if the rules change there is as much pleasure in tearing down heroes as building them up¹⁶.

- 16 However, Christy himself, who feels betrayed by the crowd, expresses contempt and mockery for those "fools of the earth" who built him up into a "mighty man" "by the power of a lie":

CHRISTY. [*In low and intense voice*] Shut your yelling, for if you're after making a mighty man of me this day by the power of a lie, you're setting me now to think if it's a poor thing to be lonesome, it's worse maybe to go mixing with the fools of earth. [*Mahon makes a movement towards him*] (Act 3, p. 117)

- 17 In Murphy's production Christy is beaten up by his father in a stylised performance. After witnessing his violent struggle with his yet unslain father, and when it appears that Christy has now, unwittingly, actually slain him, Sara Tansey and the Widow Quin at first attempt to help him to facilitate his escape. They dress him in Pegeen's nightdress and dressing gown, in which he then comically delivers the infamous "a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself" speech (Act 3, p. 118). However, when he violently resists them, Michael and Philly savagely overpower Christy. They bind him up in rope to be hung for the same crime that they had earlier lauded when it was just a fictional story that it suited them to believe in. In the social order of *The Playboy of the Western World*, lies are playfully accepted and opportunistically valued over truth as long as they are not publicly admitted to or exposed. There is a sense of self-deception, where people willingly choose to believe lies and support outrageous talk and violent actions, just as long as they are not made to face the consequences. This is clearly expressed by Pegeen:

PEGEEN. I'll say, a strange man is a marvel, with his mighty talk; but what's a squabble in your back-yard, and the blow of a loy, have taught me that there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed. [*to men*] Take him on from this, or the lot of us will be likely put on trial for his deed today. (Act 3, p. 119)

- 18 In Peter Crawley's words, the emphasis in Murphy's production is on "violence" as

[...] a kind of fantasy, eagerly consumed but never quite believed – until it's too late. (Even a pre-show announcer nudges at the cognitive dissonance, asking us to turn off our phones or "I will destroy you")¹⁷.

thus alluding to the public's attraction to and complicity in violent language (as for example, in tabloids and on social media). However, when faced with actual consequences, the play demonstrates that they will quickly prioritise to save their own skin from "the treachery of law":

MICHAEL. [*Apologetically*] It is the will of God that all should guard their little cabins from the treachery of law, and what would my daughter be doing if I was ruined or was hanged itself? (Act 3, p. 120-121)

- 19 This sense of distrust of the (English) law and efforts to circumvent it are referred to throughout the play. When first informed of Christy's breaking of the law, Michael had reassured him that no one would inform on him or prosecute him, a reassurance he now withdraws:

CHRISTY. [*Overcome with wonder*] And I'd be safe in this place from the searching law?
MICHAEL. You would, surely. If they're not fearing you, itself, the peelers in this place is decent, drouthy poor fellows, wouldn't touch a cur dog and not give warning in the dead of night. (Act 1, p. 78)

- 20 Ironically, when Christy's undead father Mahon emerges yet again as a spectre from the dead, he frees Christy himself out of contempt for the crowd's cowardice, affirming once again the power of fiction in his declared intent to tell "stories of the villainy of Mayo, and the fools is here" (Act 3, p. 121). However, Christy then proceeds to treat him as his "heathen slave", "*pushing Mahon*" and thanks the mob for having built him up into "the master of all fights from now on":

CHRISTY. Ten thousand blessings upon all that's here, for you've turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all, the way I'll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the Judgment Day. [*he goes out*] (Act 3, p. 121)

- 21 This newfound assertiveness immediately wins back Pegeen's romantic admiration:

PEGEEN. [...] [*putting her shawl over her head and breaking out into wild lamentations*] Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World. (*Ibid.*)

- 22 Gregory Castle has explained this phenomenon by equating Christy's romantic adventurousness with that of "the bards celebrated in Revivalist legend":

Christy's heroism, once it is revealed to be verbal *only*, precipitates his downfall; but it also, curiously, suggests another form of heroism (and this is what rescues Christy in the eyes of Pegeen and many viewers): like the bards celebrated in Revivalist legend, Christy struts off stage with the boast that he will go "romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day"¹⁸.

- 23 Earlier in the play Christy Mahon is compared by Pegeen Mike to the "archetypal wandering poet", Owen Roe O'Sullivan (1748-1784) from County Kerry, the "poets of the Dingle Bay", and to the biblical wise king Solomon. As explained in the footnote in the Wordsworth edition, the play "draws repeated connections between walking, poetic talking, passion and wisdom: the common ground, for Synge, is freedom from social convention" (Act 1, p. 80). Pegeen Mike is Christy's female counterpart, compared by him in turn to the wise Saint Brigid (Act 2, p. 101). In Murphy's production, when Pegeen first welcomes the newly arrived stranger Christopher (whose name obviously evokes Christ¹⁹ and which she connects to a grand international tradition of "the great powers and potentates of France and Spain", Act 1, p. 80), she washes his feet in a striking stage image that recalls Mary Magdalene washing the feet of Christ. This association is further heightened when she is seen brushing her long hair in her bedroom upstairs. To Pegeen, a violent temper is a poet's attribute: "[...] and I've heard all times it's the poets are your like – fine fiery fellows with great rages when their temper's roused". She also attributes noble and even kingly qualities to this vagabond:

PEGEEN. [...] and you a fine, handsome young fellow with a noble brow? (Act 1, p. 80)
PEGEEN. And I thinking you should have been living like a king of Norway or the Eastern World. (Act 1, p. 81)

- 24 Both Christy and Pegeen function as anarchic inverted mirrorings or spectres of the figure of a wise wandering bard, king, queen or saint, or the traditionally witty and wise Shakespearean fool. Michael J. Sidnell sees *The Playboy* as a metaphor of the heroic legend of Cuchulain and describes this in a vivid artistic image as a sort of personification of the “naturalist and tramp” Synge himself:

To be sure, Synge the naturalist and tramp was much too absolute a knave to write “Cuchulanoid” drama, but I suggest that Yeats’s reincarnations and AE’s²⁰ visions have their counterparts in Synge’s organic metaphor: that Christy Mahon is rooted in the clay and the worms of Cuchulain, Champion of Ulster, and that the *Playboy* may be seen as the story of the Championship of Ulster after it has passed through the literary guts of an Irish tramp²¹.

- 25 According to Castle, Christy’s comparison of Pegeen to

The “radiant lady” on the plains of Meath suggests not only the transformed Kathleen (the young girl who “had the walk of a queen” in Yeats’s and Lady Gregory’s *Cathleen ní Houlihan*) but also harkens back to the time of legend, when Emer boasted of her six gifts: “the gift of beauty, the gift of voice, the gift of sweet speech, the gift of needle work, the gift of wisdom, the gift of chastity”²².

Castle argues that Pegeen at first “dissociates herself from the tradition of warrior-queens and beautiful ideals” but that Christy’s “‘poetry talk’ inspires her” to identify with the independence of “these legendary women”²³.

- 26 However, the concept of bardic wisdom is turned on its head and transformed into a zombie concept as Christy brags “*bashfully*” that he is “slow at learning, a middling scholar only” (Act 1, p. 75). This is somewhat reminiscent of contemporary dismissals of scholarship and factual knowledge by populists and their voters which are arguably turning the enlightenment tradition into a zombie tradition. Christy’s slowness at learning is confirmed by his father Mahon in Act 3 who describes him as: “a dunce never reached his second book” and as “the fool of men” (Act 3, p. 106). However, in a subversion of this, Christy does flaunt some superficial classics knowledge in Act 3 when he compares Pegeen to “the Lady Helen of Troy” (Act 3, p. 111) and in the many references to historical and mythological figures in his poetic speech. This also includes an indirect reference to the Irish legend of the Salmon of knowledge as a symbol of enlightenment as Christy depicts Pegeen as a virtuous spiritual lamp illuminating and aiding his search for enlightenment in the dark:

CHRISTY. [*In a low voice*] Isn’t there the light of seven heavens in your heart alone, the way you’ll be an angel’s lamp to me from this out, and I abroad in the darkness, spearing salmons in the Owen, or the Carrowmore? (Act 3, p. 111)

- 27 This claim to enlightenment on the part of Pegeen is confirmed when she poetically rejects Shawn Keogh in Act 3, with her disdain of his mercenary attitudes and declaring herself a classical Cosmopolitan with a biblical reference to the ancient Egyptians:

PEGEEN. I’m thinking you’re too fine for the like of me, Shawn Keogh of Killakeen, and let you go off till you’d find a radiant lady with droves of bullocks on the plains of Meath, and herself bedisened in the diamond jewelleries of Pharaoh’s ma. (Act 3, p. 114)

- 28 Earlier, Shawn Keogh, similarly to Christy’s earlier description of himself as a “middling scholar”, had described himself as “a poor scholar with middling faculties to coin a lie” (Act 2, p. 96) and thus explicitly connected scholarship with the art of lying.
- 29 Christy and Pegeen are not the only anarchic figures in Synge’s play. Murphy’s production in its overblown performance, accompanied by anarchic rock music of the

group of teenage girls, gives the equally poetic and eloquent Sara Tansey an explosive demagogic power and agency of her own. She appears to be the true political leader in this production who uses rhetoric to communicate political rebellion. These “wild” girls showing up in the pub with fairground accessories could well be Irish travellers, and as such they powerfully represent the spectral concept of the ancient travelling bards in Ireland, who according to legend, refused to submit to the English landlords. When Sara Tansey stands up on the table to denounce the “English laws” (Act 2, p. 91), revolution is in the air. For a 2019 audience in Belfast, there is a powerful ghostly presence of the meaning of English laws now and in the past.

- 30 Sara Tansey appears to allude not only to historical and contemporary republican sentiment in Ireland but also to the current anger about Brexit. It is also a strong comment on power and social status. To the other characters in the plays, the girls are in the bottom social category. However, Sara Tansey’s anarchic power and her true claim to bardic tradition, subvert the social order of the play. Pegeen Mike, who sees herself as far above the girls, is a prisoner of social conventions, whereas they are wild and free. In some ways, she is performed as a toned down, ghostly version of the boyish and loud Sara, indicating that she would really like to be as independent as Sara if only she could get away with it but has to maintain a degree of respectability due to the constraints of her social position which inhibits her vitality. Peggy’s aspiration to lively independence is expressed in Murphy’s production through social gest positions taken up by Pegeen which express her opposition to traditional feminine ideals. For instance, when Eloise Stevenson in the role of the outspoken Pegeen sits down, she spreads her legs in a masculine manner. In contrast, the constraints of her social and gender role are indicated by her feminine clothes and by her household and serving work.
- 31 Travellers and militia are mentioned as an intimidating spectral presence in the background early on in the play by Pegeen:
PEGEEN. [...] and the ten tinkers is camped in the east glen, and the thousand militia [...]. (Act 1, p. 72)
- 32 When Christy Mahon first enters the pub, Pegeen asks him if he is “one of the tinkers, [...], is beyond camped in the glen?”. He replies that he is not, but at the same time confirms his itinerant status: “I am not; but I’m destroyed walking” as well as drawing attention to being in conflict with the law when he asks: “Is it often the polis do be coming into this place [...]?” and describes the pub as a “safe house” (Act 1, p. 74). However, in his initial heart to heart with Pegeen, he rather more grandly describes his siblings, who have escaped his violent father’s patriarchal rule before him, as Cosmopolitan travellers “walking all great states and territories of the world” (Act 1, p. 82). Later he describes himself as a persecuted “poor orphaned traveller, has a prison behind him, and hanging before, and hell’s gap gaping below” (Act 1, p. 76). He is described in derogatory terms as a Cosmopolitan traveller by Shawn, “a dirty tramp up from the highways of the world” (Act 3, p. 113). Recent intercultural rewritings and productions of the play have brought the more universal, international and cosmopolitan aspects of the text to the forefront²⁴.
- 33 Una Chaudhuri argues that Christy’s fictional narrative is in fact pre-framed for him by the locals he encounters in a manner that corresponds to sentence construction according to structural linguistics. She points out that each question they ask him merely offers him a particular range of options to pick from and “that his task seems to be little more than a filling in of blanks”:

[...] the narrative terms that the villagers offer Christy, along with the structure they suggest for the narrative, coincide exactly with the two great axes of language recognized by structural linguistics: the axis of selection and the axis of combination. The process of story-telling dramatized in the play precisely resembles that of sentence construction. First, a subject-term must be selected from a set of possible terms, which must then be combined with a predicate-term chosen from another set that has partly been defined by the first selection²⁵.

- 34 Declan Kiberd also highlights the local community's important part in shaping Christy's narrative. He describes Christy's role as that of a sacrificial community scapegoat for "all the sins of the world", or a sex object whose "radical blankness as a personality on his arrival" allows the projection of the "most vivid fantasies"²⁶. Indeed, Christy only comes out with the yarn of having killed his father to save himself from Pegeen's scornful mock attack and to impress her, which works:

PEGEEN. [*In mock rage*] Not speaking the truth, is it? Would you have me knock the head of you with the butt of the broom?

CHRISTY. [*Twisting around her with a sharp cry of horror*] Don't strike me. I killed my poor father, Tuesday was a week, for doing the like of that.

PEGEEN. [*With blank amazement*] Is it killed your father? (Act 1, p. 76-77)

- 35 Pegeen admires Christy precisely because he seems to have succeeded in realising her wildest fantasies to violently overcome the oppressive patriarchal order which she cannot:

PEGEEN. I never killed my father. I'd be afeared to do that, except I was the like of yourself with blind rages tearing me within, for I'm thinking you should have had great ruffling when the end was come. (Act 1, p. 81)

- 36 Both of their fathers are described as alcoholics and authoritarians. Shaun Richards points out that "all three fathers" (including the priest) exercise authoritarian control in the play and are met with various levels of deference (Shawn) or resistance (Christy and Pegeen) to the "patriarchal power-structure" and to the "mean-spirited materialism of an Irish bourgeoisie" attacked by Synge himself²⁷. When it however emerges that Christy actually failed to kill his father, Pegeen projects on to this her own powerlessness and failure to overcome her entrapment in a dead end zombie life: an overpowering alcoholic father and a weak future husband who "would wear the spirit from the saints of peace" (Act 1, p. 79) instead of the spirited and lively bardic vagabond and rebel she both desires and desires to be. Sidnell emphasises Christy's symbolic role as Pegeen's "summoned" liberator:

It is into a society which (in respect of its women in particular) feels an inadequacy, that Christy is projected, to supply virility, leadership, poetry, and freedom. Perhaps it would be better to say "summoned", for Pegeen's lamentations immediately precede Christy's appearance, as if by magic and as if in answer, from the ditch²⁸.

- 37 In the context of Irish nationalism and heroic revivalism, Kiberd highlights that "Synge was amused by the fact that the great deeds of a Cuchulain were typically applauded by men too timid to think of emulating them"²⁹. Taking a more universal and contemporary approach, I would suggest that this might explain why parts of the public, feeling trapped and impotent in their own dead end lives, admire outrageous behaviour in "political leaders": they secretly or even unconsciously see them as a personification of the agency they would like for themselves and as a "blank" canvas on which to project their own narrative desires. Pegeen's reference to "spirit" might also be seen to have a double meaning: Pegeen desires to stay in touch with the powerful

anarchic spirits of ancient Ireland, fairy spectres of a different social and political order before the colonisation of Ireland by England, in which it is said that matriarchy and “more liberal traditions”³⁰ ruled. In this sense, Pegeen, Sara Tansey, and the Widow Quin can all be seen as spectres of the tradition of the rebel women of Irish legends such as Deirdre and Grania and on a par with Synge’s other anarchic female characters in *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, *The Tinkers’ Wedding*, *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Well of the Saints*. All of these plays are also haunted by romantic vagabonds of one kind or another, spectres of the ancient Irish bards, male and female.

- 38 Confined to the more constraining roles and the injustices of their time, for all the women characters in *The Playboy of the Western World* as for the spectre of the ancient Irish bards, Christy Mahon, “time is out of joint” in Shakespeare’s Hamlet’s words. In Jacques Derrida’s words:

The time is out of joint. Theatrical Speech, Hamlet’s speech before the theater of the world, of history, and of politics. The age is off its hinges. Everything, beginning with time, seems out of kilter, unjust, dis-adjusted³¹.

- 39 As we have demonstrated, this sense of disjointed time is also conveyed by Murphy’s production: it haunts the audience with interwoven spectres of past, present and future oppression, lawlessness and unjust laws, deceit, immorality, violence and conflict; historical and contemporary spectres of fiction.

NOTES

1. John Millington Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World* [1907], in *The Complete Works of J. M. Synge*, Aidan Arrowsmith (ed.), London, Wordsworth, 2008, Act 1, p. 78. All future references to this text will be from this edition.

2. Jimmy Fay, “Executive Producer’s Note”, in the programme for the Lyric Theatre and Dublin Theatre Festival co-production of *The Playboy of the Western World*, in association with the Belfast International Arts Festival, Lyric Theatre, 8 October-2 November 2019, p. 3.

3. Oonagh Murphy, “Director’s Note”, *ibid.*, p. 4.

4. Molly O’Cathain, costume and set designer, *ibid.*, p. 9.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Jimmy Fay, “Executive Producer’s Note”, p. 3.

7. Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2000, p. 80, cited in David Butler, “Hamlet, Carnival, and *The Playboy of the Western World*”, *Irish University Review*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2012, p. 237.

8. David Butler, “Hamlet, Carnival...”, p. 243.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 244.

10. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, Peggy Kamuf (trans.), New York – London, Routledge, 1994, p. 9; originally published in French as *Spectres de Marx*, Paris, Galilée, 1993.
11. For information about the Disappeared and efforts to locate them, see “Who Were the Disappeared?”, BBC News, 4 June 2019, on line: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-27235088>; Lauren Dempster, *Transitional Justice and the “Disappeared” of Northern Ireland: Silence, Memory, and the Construction of the Past*, London – New York, Routledge, 2019; and Lauren Dempster, “‘Quiet’ Transitional Justice: ‘Publicness’, Trust and Legitimacy in the Search for the ‘Disappeared’”, *Social and Legal Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2, p. 246-272.
12. Anthony Roche, *The Irish Dramatic Revival 1899-1939*, London, Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 69.
13. Cathy Leeney, “Being Intercultural in Irish Theatre and Performance”, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Irish Theatre and Performance*, Eamonn Jordan, Eric Weitz (eds.), London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 529.
14. Richard Wakely, “Programme Note”, in the programme for the Lyric Theatre and Dublin Theatre Festival co-production of *The Playboy of the Western World*, p. 6.
15. Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, p. 83.
16. Peter Crawley, review of *The Playboy of the Western World*, *The Irish Times*, 26 September 2019, on line: <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/the-playboy-of-the-western-world-review-a-freshly-unsettling-journey-1.4031321>.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Gregory Castle, “Staging Ethnography: John M. Synge’s ‘Playboy of the Western World’ and the Problem of Cultural Translation”, *Theatre Journal*, vol. 49, no. 3, 1997, p. 277.
19. See for example, Robin Skelton, *J. M. Synge*, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 1972, p. 60-62; George Bretherton, “A Carnival Christy and a Playboy for All Ages”, *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1991, p. 322-334, cited in David Butler, “*Hamlet*, Carnival...”, p. 240.
20. George William Russell (1867-1935).
21. Michael J. Sidnell, “Synge’s Playboy and the Champion of Ulster”, *The Dalhousie Review*, vol. 45, no. 1, 1965, p. 52-53; “*The Playboy* resembles the story of the Championship of Ulster in certain obvious ways. Christy Mahon has done a deed equivalent to Cuchulain’s in modern peasant terms: the axe has become a loy; he has split his father’s skull and his father, as it were magically, returns for revenge. Like Cuchulain, Christy becomes Champion by virtue of this deed and his successive victories” (*ibid.*, p. 54). See also Diane E. Bessai, “Little Hound in Mayo: Synge’s Playboy and the Comic Tradition in Irish Literature”, *The Dalhousie Review*, vol. 48, no. 3, 1968, p. 372-383; and Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, London, Vintage, 1996, p. 171.
22. Gregory Castle, “Staging Ethnography...”, p. 277.
23. *Ibid.*
24. See for example Patrick Lonergan, *Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Brian Singleton, *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; Jason King, “Contemporary Irish Theatre, the New *Playboy* Controversy, and the Economic Crisis”,

Irish Studies Review, vol. 24, no. 1, 2015, p. 67-78; Charlotte McIvor, *Migration and Performance in Contemporary Ireland: Towards a New Interculturalism*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016; Cathy Leeney, "Being Intercultural in Irish Theatre and Performance", p. 527-546.

25. Una Chaudhuri, "The Dramaturgy of the Other: Diegetic Patterns in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*", *Modern Drama*, vol. 32, no. 3, Fall 1989, p. 382.

26. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland...*, p. 167.

27. Shaun Richards, "The Playboy of the Western World", in *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Synge*, Patrick Joseph Mathews (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 34, 36.

28. Michael J. Sidnell, "Synge's Playboy and the Champion of Ulster", p. 55.

29. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland...*, p. 171.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 178-179.

31. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. 96.

ABSTRACTS

Abstract: The 2019 Lyric Theatre and Dublin Theatre Festival co-production of J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), directed by Oonagh Murphy, encouraged an abstract reading of the play in new political contexts. Set in the 1980s at the Derry / Donegal border and performed in Northern Irish accents, it was haunted by references to the area's history of deprivation, powerlessness, the violence and victims of the conflict, the Disappeared, the communal trauma, and the current threat posed by Brexit. This essay explores how Murphy's production highlighted spectres of fiction in the play, haunted not only by historical dramaturgical traditions and by the ghosts of the Northern Irish conflict but also by the ghosts of ancient wandering Irish bards. It offers a contemporary approach that situates the play's preoccupation with fiction within an international context of the "social realities" of populist propaganda.

Résumé : La mise en scène par Oonagh Murphy de *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) de J. M. Synge, coproduite par le Lyric Theatre de Belfast et le Dublin Theatre Festival en 2019, invite à une relecture abstraite de la pièce dans un nouveau contexte politique. Le *Playboy* de Murphy évoque la région autour de la frontière entre Derry et Donegal dans les années 1980 et la pièce est interprétée par des acteurs à l'accent nord-irlandais. Elle est hantée par des références à un passé de privation, d'impuissance, de violence et par les victimes du conflit, les disparus, un traumatisme commun, et la menace du Brexit. Cet essai explore la manière dont la mise en scène de Murphy souligne la présence des spectres de la fiction dans une pièce hantée non seulement par des traditions dramaturgiques historiques et par les fantômes du conflit de l'Irlande du Nord, mais aussi par les fantômes des anciens bardes irlandais. Cet essai propose une lecture contemporaine qui situe les préoccupations de ce *Playboy* à l'égard de la fiction dans le contexte international des « réalités sociales » de la propagande populiste.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Playboy of the Western World, Irlande du Nord, Lyric Theatre, fantômes

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